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I want everyone here today to know that I am deeply interested and concerned about irrigated agriculture.

Historically, USDA has not been sufficiently involved in water matters; the states and the Department of the Interior have been more deeply involved. But on the basis of economic studies, agriculture is drastically affected by irrigation, enough so to merit our increased attention. The welfare of farmers and the future productivity of agriculture are at stake.

These public meetings are of a fact-finding nature, because we do not have the answers. We need your ideas about how we should become more involved in this entire question.

Irrigation has been one of the primary reasons for phenomenal increases in productivity and output in our nation. Here in the west, irrigation is essential to agricultural production. Your concerns about irrigation have focused on surface water supplies for the most part. But, mining ground water supplies may become more important to the west in the years ahead.

About two months ago, I announced a substantial increase in national net farm income. At the same time I mentioned that there were farmers throughout the U.S. who did not share in this increase. In the Plains area many of these farmers not only had higher production expenses because of energy costs; they faced even greater costs from drilling their irrigation wells deeper and deeper and then paying an even greater price to pump that water for crop irrigation. To make the situation even worse, some of these same farmers who redrilled their wells now find they are out of water.

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Remarks prepared for delivery by Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland before the Public Meeting on Irrigated Agriculture, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 29, 1979

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Drilling deeper was not a solution. Now these farmers have tens of thousands of dollars invested in irrigation equipment that they cannot use. Their land that was valued on the basis of its irrigation potential is suddenly worth far less when sold or used as collateral for a loan.

What if this were to happen on a statewide or regional basis? What would the impact be on our food and fiber supply or on the economic position of farmers and rural communities? After all, 27 percent of our nation's agricultural production comes from irrigated acreage that in turn supports the economy of hundreds of communities.

How should we address the economic and social problems resulting from the loss of water for irrigated agriculture?

Should massive new economic assistance programs be started without regard to the long-term consequences of those programs?

Should we launch a major water importation program from a water-abundant area to a water deficient area? Who should make that decision?

These fact-finding meetings can help avoid a crisis situation that could force us into hasty and ill-advised decisions. We have an obligation to think through the problems that we must surely face, and when I say "we" that most certainly includes state governments.

The importance of conservation of our water resources is evident. Farmers whose wells have run dry will testify to the urgency of this action.

Research and demonstration in water conservation, such as that by the Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service, is one alternative. In one area of the state during a three year demonstration project, proper irrigation scheduling techniques were applied. The results were dramatic: 37 percent less water was pumped and there was no reduction in crop yield.



If these results were applied to the entire state's irrigated acreage, the annual savings could be 4.3 million acre feet of water, a direct energy savings for pumping water of \$47 million and a savings in nitrogen costs of \$38 million.

If this is not proof enough to stimulate greater conservation, the question then must be asked: Who will mandate water conservation?

Do we need to increase our research efforts to develop less water-intensive crops? Conservation alone may not sufficiently preserve our limited and dwindling water resources.

I believe it is incumbent upon those of us in the federal government to continue to re-evaluate our basic water policies and water-related programs and question whether they in fact encourage the use or the conservation of water.

Are there incentives or disincentives that we can or should implement to cause a shift to other crops so that scarce water supplies can be used more efficiently, and yet make it possible for farmers to continue to have an economic return on their production?

Farmers who have made massive investments in irrigation are indeed facing an uncertain economic future if they are in areas where water is becoming more limited each year. I am sympathetic with these farmers, because their decision to begin irrigation may have been influenced by a number of people and institutions. I don't have an answer to their economic problems, but I am certain that answers must be found to avert greater difficulties for the farmers involved as well as for our nation's ability to produce food and fiber.

We do not have answers to these perplexing, complicated issues, but long-term solutions can be found if sufficient resources are coordinated and committed.



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